A

SERMON,

ON

THE IMPERFECTION

OF

THE PRESENT STATE.

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A

SERMON.

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PSALMS, cxix. 96.
I have seen an end of all perfection.

IN the gay and thoughtless morning of the day of life, when there is little experience of the dispositions and manners of mankind, our thoughts of the objects with which we are conversant are too often in extremes. The materials for judging are few, and ill assorted. The affections, which are warm and impetuous, are apt to mislead our judgment of individual and social merit. Some of those, who form the associations of our early youth, are all perfection in our notion of them: and others, whose education is a little different from our own, may not receive credit, even for the good which visibly belongs to them.

Few, at the outset of life, entertain just ideas of religious Bodies. That charity, *which thinketh no evil*, and distinguishes real christianity from its livery of outward forms, is not much understood by those who are carefully educated in the peculi-

arities of any religious denomination. They too readily conclude that their party possesses every degree of excellence, and that other parties are mere sectarians or schismaticks, and most egregiously wrong in their principles and practice.

There is hardly an object, engaging the young mind, which is not the subject of precipitant and incorrect opinion. How fondly does it dream of perfect happiness in earthly pleasures and acquisitions! How eagerly does it pursue some phantom, which the imagination paints in the richest colours and most facinating charms! Paradise is at the end of every path, which youthful fancy marks out. The difficulties which intervene, and the possibility of ultimate disappointment are rarely, if at all, contemplated. Self diffidence, which checks the boldness of adventure and produces caution, is none of the distinctions of youth. The mind reposes upon itself, upon its own powers, as adequate to every enterprise, as sufficient to gain every object of desire; independently of the efforts of rivalship, and the mutation of human affairs. A broad foundation is thus laid, by imagination alone, for disappointment and trouble in the subsequent stages of life.

As we advance and become acquainted with real life; the spell is broken, the fantastic vision disappears. We find that neither men nor things are entitled to the character which we imagined them to hold; that we ourselves, instead of being

qualified to be our own guides, and the framers of our own happiness, are wholly dependant creatures; that the pursuits, on which we entered with the highest hopes, abound with unforeseen difficulties and mock our expectation of substantial good. The various disappointments incident to premature opinions, extravagant hopes and misplaced affections, justify the saying in the text *I have seen an end to all perfection.*

This declaration is the result of experience.—It is still well that men learn wisdom from experience. But all do not. Some turn a deaf ear to the voice of events; and despise every attempt of sound reason and affectionate friendship to put them right. They retain, in some degree, the folly of their first days, and continue the dupes of original error. They still look for perfection and happiness, where neither of them is to be found. Like the spider, when one web of ideal good is destroyed, they weave another in its room; and too often go on in this manner, till death closes the scene.

For the benefit of such characters, and of all who are in danger of drawing erroneous conclusions from superficial views of men and things, and of entertaining expectations which can never be realized; it may be well to dwell a little longer on the sentiment of the text, and to exhibit it in different lights.

1st.—It is obvious that material enjoyments and

earthly pursuits have nothing in them, capable of yielding perfect satisfaction. The desires of man are immortal and unbounded. The most valued things, therefore, of a mere sensible nature, come far short of filling up these desires. The wealthy are not satisfied with treasures of gold. Were a man of ambition to gain universal empire, he would sit down discontented, because he had not more worlds to conquer. The epicure, *whose God is his belly*, is the unhappiest of mortals, amidst all those varieties and refinements of luxury, which are selected for the gratification of a craving and sickly appetite.

If such things did even afford satisfaction, their liability to change would still render them imperfect. *Riches to make themselves wings, and fly away, as an eagle towards heaven. Man being in honour continueth not.* Either his honours are dashed from his brow by some unforeseen accident; or he is separated from them by the messenger of death. In this view, *all the works, that are done under the sun, are vanity and vexation of spirit;* or, at least, all attachments to them, involving an undue estimate of their value.

Let those, who are wedded to this world, as if it could render them perfectly happy, go to the church yard. Let them read the vanity of their hopes on the monuments of the dead. See there the name of some merchant, who once distinguished himself in his profession. Behold the breviat

of some captain or general, renowned in arms; of some promising youth, cut off at his entrance on the stage of the world; of some gray haired father, who withstood the blasts of many years, and at length sunk into the earth. What are they now? *dust;* and no other distinction of dust, but what appears upon their grave stones.

Were we thus often to place ourselves under *death's gloomy cypress shades, where a ray of fantastic vanity does not pierce;* we would be more habitually impressed with the imperfection of all earthly concerns. The young would learn to moderate their affections in the pursuit of vain and fugitive pleasures. And the aged would see the folly of seeking after gain, as the constituent of happiness. It has been often remarked of old people, that the longer they live, the more they are glued to the world. This second childhood is much more unreasonable than the first; and subversive of their peace, in the inevitable hour of separation from the objects of their undue attachment.

2d.—Man's mental operations and external conduct partake of the imperfection, which belongs to the present system of things. Sin has darkened and deranged his faculties. His views of truth and error, right and wrong, are so indeterminate; that differences of opinion on such points have always existed, and continue to distract society. The light of science has not enabled the

students of nature to penetrate far into the works of the Almighty. After all the discoveries of ancient and modern times, the reflection of Job is still just, *how little a portion is heard of him?* Man's affections are not in a better state than his understanding. These incline to evil. Some men, who have had the advantages of correct education, become a disgrace to themselves and their connexions; others, though eminent for piety and virtue, are not without moral defects, sufficient to prove that *there is not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not.*

The institutions of christianity are designed and calculated to rectify the disorders introduced by sin, to enlighten the understanding in the knowledge of God and Christ, to subdue the passions, to purify the affections of the heart, to bend the will to righteousness, to facilitate the performance of all the great duties and charities of life. But many instances occur, in which this excellent end is not at all accomplished; and in others the accomplishment is only in part. Persons of the most upright and spiritual character are *compassed with infirmity.* Tho' christians *have put off the old man with his deeds; and put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of their creator;* yet the old man does not wholly leave them, and the new man is only in a state of infancy and progressive improvement. The period of their natural lives is required, and the con-

stant assistance of divine grace, for overcoming the ignorance and vices of their minds, and for bringing every good principle to full size and vigour. It is not till death, or rather after death, that believers become perfect men, and arrive at *the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*

If perfection was at all attainable in this life, we would naturally look for it among those who pass, or have passed, for the favourites of Heaven.—We would expect to see examples of it in the biography of *holy men of God, who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost,* who enjoyed the peculiar advantage of internal revelations and familiar intercourse with the Deity. But, so far were these men from being perfect, or laying claim to a spotless character; that ignorance and the lust of evil caused them to commit a variety of faults, of which they became sensible and were ashamed. Tho' they fell into great errors; yet they had none of that pride or weakness, which leads so many conscious offenders, against the laws of God and men, to have recourse to those arts of denial and extenuation, which, in fact, are far more criminal than the charges themselves, and a greater evidence of imperfection. It deserves farther to be remarked, concerning saints of antiquity, that some of their faults struck against the very virtues for which they were most distinguished. Abraham, the friend of God, ranks high in the class of believers; yet on

one occasion, he was as remarkable for want of confidence in God, as ever he was renowned for resting on the divine authority with regard to what seemed incredible. Moses, whose equanimity and moderation have been justly extolled, in his general dealings with a discontented and an ungrateful people, lost his temper and gave way to intemperate rage, at a time when he was employed by God to work a miracle for the supply of their wants. Job, it is well known, bore all his calamities at their first coming on, with calm resignation and exemplary piety; yet the same man cursed the day of his birth, and expressed regret that he had not been strangled in life's porch. The Apostle Peter, usually full of courage and intrepidity, was nevertheless overawed, by the taunts a servant maid, into a timid and unmanly denial of his divine Lord and Master.—From these instances, and others which might be mentioned, it strikingly appears that the very best of men fail, even in what constitues the excellence of their character.

Alas! where is that man in any age of the world, in any station or rank of life, who holds the approbation of his fellow creatures for universal integrity, or whose conscience testifies that all his motives and actions are what they ought to be? Even the Ministers of Religion, whose office renders them particularly acquainted with matters of sin and duty, inheriting the same de-

ceased nature that others do, and being exposed to similar temptations, require the same pardoning mercy, the same directing spirit, the same protecting power; in order that they may be saved with others from everlasting perdition, and brought on their way with renovated strength and improving virtue, to the regions of pure and unchangeable felicity.

3d.—All associations for political or religious purposes are necessarily imperfect; because they are composed of imperfect individuals. The laws of Kingdoms and Commonwealths, have never yet been so wisely framed, or so happily executed, as to prevent internal commotions, and disputes among foreign Nations. Ignorance and pride, ambition and tyranny have been known to destroy the wisest political institutions, to light the torch of discord at home, and to kindle the flames of war abroad; to spread terror, desolation and misery over the fairest portion of the globe. In a comparative view of different governments, or of the measures of different administrations of the same government; there may be reason for saying that one is better than another. But, when we consider the narrow bounds of all human knowledge and foresight, and the intermixture of private interests and feelings with public functions, we can expect no government entirely free of defects. It is sufficient that it has more of good than evil. In such circumstances a spirit of disaffection

is infinitely more to be deplored than any real or imaginary grievances which may be the subjects of complaint: for such a spirit involves a dereliction of the obvious duties of subjects, in order to oppose alleged undutifulness in their rulers; and it leads to far worse consequences to society, than can ever follow from the misconduct of men in power. It is more than a display of human imperfection. It shews that the *heart is desperately wicked.*

Religious society, as well as that which is constituted for the protection and advancement of secular interests, presents a motley aspect of beauty and deformity, of good and evil. So far as the laws and institutions of Heaven are concerned, the Church on earth is perfect. But human corruptions, mixing with the regulations of infinite wisdom, stamp upon her the character of imperfection. The children of sion have their weaknesses, and are subject to unintentional error; whilst they are associated with others, who do not possess their virtues, and act from improper motives. Such is the state of the visible Church, exhibiting a compound of true and false opinions, of moral and immoral principles.

We talk of purity of church fellowship. And the advantages of purity should induce us to seek after it, as far as we can, without injury to the general cause of religion: But, in fact, such purity is more an idea than a reality. It seems to be

borrowed, rather from descriptions of the heavenly state, where *men see no longer darkly as thro' a glass*, where *nothing unclean or that defileth can enter;* than from the actual circumstances of the church on earth at any period of her history. Our Saviour has expressly assured us that *the wheat and tares will grow together till the harvest*, in spite of all endeavours to cultivate and purify the soil.

The divisions which exist among professors of christianity in respect of religious doctrines and modes of worship, are a farther proof of the imperfection of religious bodies. The bible is the standard which all of them acknowledge; yet they are split into various factions, holding differences of sentiment, of sufficient importance in their estimation, to found separate fellowships. Nor can there be any remedy for this evil, in as much as just information, were it even possessed by one body, cannot be equally diffused thro' the different ranks of society; nor universally received, on account of that contrariety of tempers, habits and interests, which arises from education and particular connexions of human life. The worst and most injurious tendency of these divisions is, that of banishing catholic love, and elevating party attachments to its sacred place; that of regarding one another, as if christianity was confined to one sect or denomination alone. It is the glory, however, of the present age that this mark of imperfection is wearing away, and that the fences of bigotry and supersti-

tion, which confined christians to a particular range of communication, are so far removed that they can now extend their intercourse, and avail themselves of *the liberty wherewith Christ hath made them free.*

But, as human nature is prone to run into extremes, it is possible that this liberty may grow into licentiousness, in consequence of confounding the essentials of religion, and accidental forms of little importance. Some of the professors of christianity, who pretend to rear their systems on the foundation of Christ and the Apostles, hold errors, subversive of the plan of God's grace, as revealed in the gospel. To countenance such religious professors, without regard to the peculiarities of their sentiments, would be a very dangerous experiment. It would be lending our aid to the propagation of masked infidelity or fanaticism, instead of that pure and rational faith which our blessed Saviour taught, and which we are commanded to hold fast. It is in such circumstances that the prediction of Paul is accomplished. *The time will come when men will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears: and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.* And, says our Lord, as a caution to all future ages; "*In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.*"

4.—Or what may be viewed as a continuation

of the former particular, transactions the most consonant to the spirit of christianity, such, for instance, as relate to the support of the poor and the conversion of the heathen, are evidently accompanied with some imperfections. *It is much to the honour of the inhabitants of christian countries, especially of Britain and America, that the indigent of their fellow citizens, the uninlightened and degraded millions of the human family througout the world, have excited general commiseration and vigorous efforts for their relief. But, whether the means adopted, in all cases, sufficiently answer the end, is a question which admits some latitude of opinion.

One evil, attending public provisions for the relief of pauperism, is that of teaching the poor to look to them, as matter of right; so that, in the supply of their wants, they do not feel those grateful and heart-improving sentiments which charity ought to inspire. Besides, such provisions for the poor, notwithstanding their excellence in other respects, by holding out a certainty of support in any circumstances of destitution, tend to encourage the idle and dissipated to pursue, with greater rapidity, those irregular courses which bring them

* This part of the subject was omitted in delivering the discourse from the pulpit; Besides as the author does not read his sermons, but depends chiefly on memory; it cannot be expected that what he delivers will exactly agree with his notes.

to the point, where charity meets them and bestows her favours. The same observation applies to institutions for particular kinds of distress and infamy. The alleviation, which these give to human wretchedness, intitles them to the highest respect. But, whilst this design is accomplished in the case of the wretched, who are taken under their protection; there may be others in the ordinary walks of human life, living criminally, from an expectation of the same assistance when they can do no better. Thus far charitable establisments are defective, calling upon the wisdom of experience to promote the noble ends of their formation, in such a manner as to give the least possible encouragement to profligacy and vice.

Another excellent direction of christain love and sympathy regards the state of the heathen, that of diffusing among them the knowledge and blessings of divine truth. Some associations for that god-like purpose, being confined to particular bodies of religious professors, are concerned of course to propagate, both what is peculiar to these bodies, and what they hold in common with other christians. Associations, formed for the same object, but upon a more liberal principle, seem to command by their liberality more general patronage. It is well, if the points of difference, which exist in societies composed of different parties, are really considered by all the members as of so little moment, that the heathen to whom

they send the gospel, will be in no danger of having their attention drawn to those nice distinctions and unprofitable discussions, which have so often stabbed the vitals of christianity in the most favorable situations.

Imperfection belongs to missionary societies, to the wisest and best constituted of them, as well as to other descriptions of public bodies. It may be questioned whether a desire of doing much in a short time has not betrayed them into some oversights, in the choice of their men and measures. Of all public teachers, those who go as missionaries to instruct the heathen ought to be the most eminent for talent and erudition, as well as piety and virtue. The Apostles, whose miraculous powers supplied any existing deficiencies of education, were only *twelve* in number. They depended upon native converts for the general diffusion of the gospel. And their high respectability insured the attachment of these converts, and their ready compliance with proposed plans of duty and usefulness. This is a model for those whose benevolent attention is turned to Pagan Countries. As millions are destitute of the gospel, and cannot all be comprehended in missionary undertakings; a selection of those, who are to enjoy the benefit, is necessary to be made requiring no small degree of wisdom and penetration to do it with propriety. Large sums are annually collected and expended in the United King-

dom, for the support of missions among Pagans of the remotest climes; and what is extraordinary, similar descriptions of heathen, nearer to British christians, and having no less claim on their generosity, are entirely overlooked. The *Indians* of *British* America have been hitherto neglected by every society in Scotland and England; though their religious instruction and acceptance of christianity might be effected at half the expense, which is required for the conversion of equal numbers in Africa and Asia.

Desirous of making some particular improvement of the doctrine of the text, and of the observations which it has suggested; I beg leave, my brethren, to state that, as we are all concerned to advance in wisdom and goodness, a sense of our own deficiencies and those of others should operate, as an incentive to this duty. We are taught in the

1st Place a lession of humility and moderation in all our intercourse with society. Pride is represented by this subject as a most unreasonable and disgusting passion. The qualities, on which pride founds its pretensions, are often ideal; where they have a real existence, there is so little excellence in them, or that excellence is so blurred with defects, that the possessor ought rather be humbled, than filled with extravagant notions of his own superiority. Humility is the best ornament of every station, and the most becoming

creatures, whose foundation is in the dust, and whose sins are more than their virtues.

The doctrine of imperfertion furnishes a rule also for our expectations, in reference to our fellow creatures. Let us never expect much from them, and then we shall never be painfully disappointed. If we meet with more than we expect, the greater will be our pleasure in the discovery.

2d.—Let us beware of an overweening regard to objects of a mere earthly description, and of a keener pursuit of them than what is consistent with a true knowledge of their unsatisfactory nature. Let us *use this world as not abusing it*, knowing *that the fashion thereof passeth away*. Thousands daily make shipwreck of the principles of virtue, and of all that ought to be dear to the human heart, by entering too deeply into the poisoned delights of sense, and forgetting their immortality.

Convinced, my brethren, that every thing truly valuable depends on the cultivation of right affections towards God and men, and on a proper exercise of the faculties of reason which we possess, let us make this the main business of our few and fleeting days. The more we attain of such solid wealth; the greater will be the satisfaction to ourselves and our usefulness to society; the more peaceful will be our dying moments; the higher our dignity in the everlasting kingdom of God our Saviour.

I know nothing so conducive to these important purposes as just conceptions of our individual characters. So long as our attention is taken up with the defects or excellencies of others, and the state of our own minds is overlooked; it is impossible that we can make that progress towards perfection, which is evidently our greatest interest and one of the principal ends of our present existence. I would therefore

Lastly.—Recommend self knowledge as the first step to all improvement. Here I must beg your indulgence for a few minutes longer; because the subject is not merely one of the most important, but unfortunately the least regarded by the children of men. You are all persuaded that intellectual and moral perfection does no more reside in human bosoms on earth, than angels of light do in houses of clay. How come you by this persuasion? Is it, by a discovery of the evils which exist in your own character, or by perceiving them only in the conduct of others? Man, woman, have you *seen an end to all perfection* in your own thoughts and actions, as well as in the world around you? In your estimate of human deficiencies, did you begin with *yourself*? or have you hitherto left *yourself* out of the estimate? The answer of this question is connected with all that is truly valuable in character, and with happiness in time and eternity.

In ordinary life who would neglect his own af-

fairs, contenting himself with an examination of those which belong to his neighbour? The prudent merchant makes himself acquainted with every error, which he may have committed in his mercantile transactions and connexions. Were it not so, he could not act with that precaution which his success requires; and his ruin would be inevitable. Is a man's knowledge of his spiritual condition less necessary for enabling him to rectify his past errors, and to conduct himself with increasing wisdom and propriety? why are the precepts and promises of the bible so little regarded, and the institutions of religion so useless to many, who have been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity? It is because they know not themselves, and the state of their affairs. Why do censors of a neighbour's faults, dwell upon these faults with malignant pleasure, magnifying them perhaps beyond all natural proportion, and yet passing over as great evils in their own hearts and lives? The same answer returns, because they know not themselves, being always abroad and never at home. Such persons, whatever may be their profession of religion and morality, are in great danger of finishing their course, without one valuable attainment. *If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them who are lost, in whom the God of this world hath blinded the minds of them, who believe not; lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ shine into them.*

It is evident from the want and prossession of self-knowledge that nothing is so necessary to the commencement and progress of personal reformation. It leads the way to all that is excellent in character, to all that is transporting in future bliss. Dependent, my brethren, as well as any of you, on the same principle for becoming *wise unto salvation*, I pray God to enable me to know myself. *Search me O God and see if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Were this course to be universally followed; the sum of human prejudices, imperfections and immoralities would rapidly be diminished; the light of truth would shine over the world of mind with less impeded rays; the virtues of christianity would strengthen and extend their influence; earth would be an image of heaven. Whatever others do, let the benefits of self-consideration induce us to attend to it in the most serious and impartial manner.

If there is a person present, who has never attended to this duty, whose self-ignorance is carried so far, that he sees nothing wrong about himself; I beseech him, before this darkness meets the blackness of darkness forever, to reflect candidly on the extent and spirituality of the divine laws. Let him bring to this standard all his boasted pretensions. Let him next place himself at the bar of the eternal where he must soon appear, and say whether he is willing to abide the result

of an impartial scrutiny. We are assured in the gospel, that nothing will then stand the test, but faith in Jesus Christ, and a life which has been adding *to faith virtue; to virtue knowledge; to knowledge temperance: to temperance patience; to patience godliness; to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.* God grant that *these things may be in us, and abound, that we may neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our* LORD JESUS CHRIST.

FINIS.